

“ WE ARE NOT ‘UNDER THE LAW’ ! ”

*Perhaps THE Most Familiar Teaching in the Entire New Testament.
At the Same Time, One of the Most Misrepresented and Misunderstood.
What Did the Apostle Paul Actually Mean When He Said, ‘Under the Law’?*

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If there is a concept that brings greater comfort to New Testament Christianity, it would be difficult to find. That most often cited passage found in the writings of the Apostle Paul, that “**We are not Under the Law**” provides the basis for much of what is represented as “*New Covenant*” Theology. Nowhere does the theme find greater affinity than among the segment of Christianity known for being “antinomian”! (**anti-** against, **nomos-** law) Yet among other persuasions, this widely accepted premise is also accepted, though not without a certain degree of discomfort, on account of what so many have casually taken Paul’s statement to mean.

Regarded as Involving Applicability.

We live in a world that has been pre-conditioned to the long-established premise, that being, that the Apostle’s assertive statement here acknowledges the fact that the Law no longer applies to those who are ‘under grace’. That it is a matter of ‘applicability’. “The Law no longer applies to us”, they say. This subliminal premise is not new to theology. In fact, the basic point of view was anticipated and pointedly commented upon by Paul himself. Peter relates that those who really didn’t understand would ‘wrest’ Paul’s statements to mean something other than what he intended.¹ Paul himself identifies one of those important areas. In Romans 3:8, he makes reference to this very issue. “*And not rather, (as we be slanderously reported, and as some affirm that we say,) Let us do evil that good may come?*”...This in the context of just having said, ...“*But if our unrighteousness commend the righteousness of God, what shall we say? Is God unrighteous who takes vengeance?... God forbid: for how then shall God judge the*

world?” Here, Paul is referring to the very same issue that he does in Romans 6: verses 1 and again in verses 14-15.

Some people were prone, and some even eager, to mis-represent Paul’s intent. He understood human nature well enough to foresee that some would regard his statement as advocating continuing in sin, even consciously, in order to become more abundant in grace. Seeing this explains why Paul immediately disclaims that possibility of meaning. When he makes the familiar statement in Romans 6:14 & 15: “*For sin shall not have dominion over you: for you are not under the law, but under grace. What then, shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? **God forbid.***” Up in verse 1, he says, “*What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound? **God forbid.***”

Despite Paul’s immediate qualifiers, many still prefer to insist that he meant that the Law no longer applies to us! Injecting the idea of it being about applicability presents a distorted platform from which to understand what he was really saying. This has been the case for centuries. This is the world in which we grew up, from which we drew our earliest conceptions. The premise that the Law no longer applies to us is so ingrained in our religious society and our subconscious, that it can be regarded as heretical to hold a differing view.

Of all Paul’s theological statements, this one is the most mis-understood and mis-represented.

To Whom Does the Law Apply?

The very idea of our ‘not being under the Law’ poses the premise that the Law applies to some but not to others. In other words, that there is some

¹ 2 Pet. 3:16 “...in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest..”

‘selective’ applicability with the Law. The New Covenant theologian will readily allow that the Law still applies to the Jew, but not to the Christian. But if the Law doesn’t **apply** to us, (we who are under grace), how could we ‘continue in sin’? This clear question exposes the flaw in that line of reasoning. The fact that we still can sin, shows that the Law must still apply to us!

Can You Break a Law that Doesn’t Apply?

If the issue involves ‘applicability’, and if “not under the Law” means the Law no longer applies to us, then how does one ‘continue in sin’ that grace may abound? If the Law doesn’t apply, then how can we break it? Paul’s very next statement shows that the Law still **DOES** apply to us, otherwise how could we still break it? If it was Paul’s intent to suggest that the Law no longer applies, then he apparently didn’t know that, as evident by what he saw need to say in the very next sentence!

The fundamental position of those who hold the non-applicability idea generally allege that the Law came in with the Old Covenant and went out with the Old Covenant.

Ask yourself the questions, “Did you acquire the ability to sin by first having come under the Old Covenant? Does a person lose the ability to sin by coming out from under the Old Covenant? Do those who never were under ANY covenant not have the ability to sin?” See the problem with that position? For that matter, who was Paul referring to when he said, “All have sinned”?² Does this include all people of all time? How does a person break a law that doesn’t apply to him? How could all the world sin, who never were under, or even aware of the existence of the Old Covenant? If the answer to these questions is, NO, then the Law must apply to all. For that matter, when were **we** ever under the Old Covenant? The Old Covenant was passé 19 centuries before we were born!

Obviously, there is something very wrong with the idea that Paul’s statement is suggesting that the

² Romans 3:23 “For all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God.”

Law no longer applies to us. Our not being “under the Law” has nothing at all to do with the Law’s applicability. The Law applies consistently to all people of all time, otherwise, how could all have sinned?

Once and for all, we need to rid our consciousness of the idea that applicability is at issue here! It has nothing to do with applicability! However, this idea is the key element of those who propose that Paul meant that we no longer need to keep it.

If Not That, Then What?

Does our being ‘not under the Law’ make the Law any less applicable in our lives? Did it become any more difficult to sin when the Old Covenant was superceded? It appears, some have not considered these basic questions. What ever did Paul mean when he said what he did? “We are not under the Law”!

This is not an unimportant question. It is one we must answer if we are to understand Paul’s intent, or the New Testament message, or even to grasp the essence of New Covenant Theology.

Knowledge and/or Compliance

Any law that exists, we relate to that law under one of the following basic criteria. First is **knowledge**. We either know the law or we don’t. Secondly is the matter of **compliance**. We either keep the law or we don’t. If we put these factors together into every possible configuration, we’ll come up with only these four.

1. We know the law and don’t keep it,
2. We know the law and do keep it,
3. We don’t know the law and don’t keep it,
4. We don’t know the law, yet do keep it.

This is fundamental logic. But is it Biblical?

Actually, the Apostle Paul, in his writings, uses four different terms for a person’s relationship to the Law. Do his four Biblical terms correlate to our logical terms? If not, then he must be identifying additional configurations of relationship to Law. But if there aren’t any but these four, then

there must be direct correlation. Could that be? And, if so, does that tell us anything?

Actually, there are **two** places where Paul uses three of his terms in the same verses! In one place, he uses three terms, and in another, three also, but while incorporating two of the former, he adds one that he doesn't use in the first instance. Can we, from these, gain any insight into what he meant when he used the term 'under the law'? Can Paul's own writings provide us a clear definition of what he meant?

Those two places are:

Romans 2:12-15 *"For as many as have sinned without law shall also perish without law: and as many as have sinned **in** the law shall be judged by the law;...For when the Gentiles, which have not the law, do by nature the things contained in the law, these having not the law, are a law unto themselves. Which show the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing them witness..."*

Here, we see three distinct situations presented:

- Those having sinned without law,
- Those having sinned **in** the law, and
- Those without the law, but who **keep** it!

Before commenting, let's look at the other place:

1 Corinthians 9:20-22 *"I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some."* (end of verse 22). *"And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews: to them that are **under** the law, as **under** the law, that I might gain them that are **under** the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (not being without law to God, but **under*** the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law."* (* **under** in this one place is mis-translated: It should read: **within**)

Here, we see three distinct situations also, but set in a slightly different mix. Actually, these passages provide us a very revealing set of definitions and considerations. For example, note that he regards the Jew as being distinct from the category of persons he regards as being 'under the law'! He's not saying the same thing twice!

Also, note the mis-translation in verse 21. The

word '**under**' in Paul's parenthetical disclaimer is clearly a different word than the 'under' used elsewhere. Here it should read: **within**. (The Greek was En-nomos) Paul uses distinct terms for the various intra-personal relationships toward God's Law. In fact, we see him using three Greek words, but involving FOUR different situations. They are:

Under which is Strong's #5259, "**Hupo**-nomos"

In, (within) which is Strong's #1772, "**En**-nomos"

Without, (have not) which is #459, "**A**-nomos"

We have the person who is 'under' the law, we have the person who is 'in or within' the law, and the person who is 'without' the law who doesn't keep it as opposed to that rare situation of the person who is 'without' the law yet who does keep it! (He does acknowledge existence of that forth, tho' exceptional, category in Rom. 2:15)

Do They Correlate?

So, we have four categories in Biblical terms also. The question posed earlier, Do Paul's four terms correspond to the four logical terms? How could they not?

That being the case, we need only to identify which Biblical term corresponds to which common or logical term. Doing so will give us a clear definition of what Paul MEANT when he used each one.

Let's go to the easiest one first. The one identified as being 'without, yet who keeps'. This would have to correspond to the person who doesn't know the law, yet who keeps it. (#4 above). (There are people like that: People of inherently good character, who wouldn't steal or lie or kill, rare though they might be.) With that one in place, it makes it easy to identify that person who is 'without' the law, who presumably doesn't keep it in that he doesn't even know it. This one, then, would correspond to the person who doesn't know the law and who doesn't keep it. (#3 above)

This leaves only two to identify: Under and Within. And in our logical categories there are two: the person who knows the law and does keep it, and who knows it and doesn't keep it. Which is which?

We can see that the person who is ‘within’ must be that person who knows the law and who keeps it.

What Do You Mean “Under”?

That leaves us the final category of person, being that person who knows the law, and doesn’t keep it! That is the person who is ‘under’ the law. This gives us a clear definition of what Paul meant when he used that term: “**Under the Law**”.

Someone who knows the law and doesn’t keep it! Is it any wonder then that Paul says, “We are not under the law”. In other words, **we** are not of that category of person who knows the law and who does not keep it! (Of course, we didn’t get that way by our incessant and perfect law-keeping. We got out from under (the law’s demand of a penalty) by God’s grace! This was the issue, not at all that the law doesn’t apply to those who are ‘under grace’.

What Paul said makes so much sense, when understood that way, that we’d say it ourselves even if he never did!

We are not of that category of people who know the law and who don’t keep it.

Our theologians want us to think the Jew remains under (obligation to keep) the law, while the Christian is exempt.³ That wasn’t what Paul was saying! And notice, Paul identifies the Jew as distinct and separate from that person who is ‘under’ the law. (Review again 1 Cor. 9:20) “*And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews: to them that are **under** the law, as **under** the law, that I might gain them that are **under** the law;...*” These two are not the same.

That being the case, with the Jew being distinct from the category of person who is ‘under the law’, we can here see **all four** of those categories used together in this single passage.

1. One who knows the law and doesn’t keep it, “**Under the Law**” (**Hupo-nomos**)
2. One who knows the law and keeps it, “**Within the Law**” (**The Jew**) (**En-nomos**)

³ Rom. 3:9 “*What then, are we better than they? No, in no wise: for we have before proved both Jews and Gentiles, that they are all under sin.*”

3. Doesn’t know the law and doesn’t keep it, “**Without the Law**” (**A-nomos**)
4. Doesn’t know the law and yet does keep it, “**Without, yet keeps**” (**A-nomos**)

But, We are Under Grace!

Now, we know that in order to not be “under the Law”, we need to have come “under grace”. Many rest in comfort with the idea that they’re not under the law without giving due concern to whether they’re truly ‘under grace’! God cannot extend grace to the willfully disobedient! (Gal. 2:17)

Two other verses explain other prerequisites: Being led of the Spirit: “*Walk in the Spirit, and you shall not fulfill the lusts of the flesh. For the flesh lusts against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh: and these are contrary the one to the other: so that you cannot do the things that you would. But if you are led of the Spirit, you are not **under** the law.*” (Gal. 5:16-18) So, why would we need to be led of the Spirit in doing what we are perfectly capable of doing on our own (sinning), if ‘not under the law’ meant free to continue sinning?

Another component is Faith: “*But the scripture has concluded all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ might be given to them that believe. But before faith came, we were kept **under** the law, shut up unto the faith that should afterward be revealed.*”

How could anyone conclude that Paul was saying that the law no longer had any applicability to those who have come under grace? Especially considering his next statement, that the suggestion of continuing sinning was “God forbidden”! No, the issue here isn’t applicability, as this concluding verse so plainly shows: “*Now we know that what things soever the law says, it says to them who are **under** the law, that every mouth may be stopped, and all the world may become guilty before God.*” Romans 3:19 It’s not a question of removing the standard, but of removing the guilt! It isn’t possible for anyone to be guilty before God of having broken a law that isn’t applicable.

Paul had no intention of suggesting God’s Law had no further applicability upon God’s True Saints.

No, rather, he showed us plainly that the person who is 'under the law' is the person who remains 'guilty'! His point is: **That's not us!** S